

Women of the Reformation: Tales of Power, Deception and Protest

1 Peter 2: 4-10

In honour of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and as an expression of my firm conviction that the Holy Spirit will continue to shove us toward new reforms, I have picked three reforming women, or groups of women, as embodiments of this movement.

I will first talk about Katharina von Bora, Martin Luther's wife and a woman of power. Then I will talk about what little we know about the Anabaptist midwives and their acts of deliberate deception. Finally I will talk about Argula von Grumbach, who puts the "protest" in the word Protestant.

St. Ambrose, the 4th century bishop of Milan once wrote in a letter, "through a woman distress entered the world; through a virgin salvation came upon it...men who do not take to wife are accounted as the angels of God in heaven." I suspect that many of the husbands of the women we will get to know this morning might have come to agree with Ambrose after living with their troublesome wives.

The Reformation certainly turned out to be a mixed bag for women. Luther and Calvin were both firm in their belief that a woman's place was in the home and, at the same time, I would not be standing up here preaching today if it weren't for the Reformation! But I'd like to focus more on a few women of the Reformation and leave at least Calvin for another day when I have the stomach for him.

In 1504, a five-year-old girl named Katharina von Bora was sent to live the cloistered life of a novice nun in Brehna, Germany and was later moved to another monastery in Nimbschen called "Marienthron" or, Mary's Throne. Despite the education that she no doubt received as a nun, she grew restless with her cloistered life. She had heard about the reform movement that was gaining momentum and the ideas of the monk Martin Luther.

So, she and a group of other restless nuns from Nimbschen reached out to Luther and convinced him to help them escape. Luther employed the services of a herring fish deliveryman to smuggle them out. The runaway nuns hid themselves in the back of his cart in a pile of fish and eventually arrived in Wittenberg, stinky but free.

In his book entitled *Here I Stand* about Martin Luther, Ronald H. Bainton recounts how one local student wrote a letter to a friend describing this dramatic escape, saying, “A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all the more eager for marriage than for life. God grant them husbands lest worse befall.”¹

Despite Luther’s pleas, the families of the nuns would not take them back, so billeting arrangements were made for them and marriages negotiated. Katharina, however, despite many suitors, only wanted to marry Luther the ex-monk, who agreed saying famously that marriage would “please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh and the devils to weep.” I guess there are worse reasons to get married.

While Luther was certainly a formidable reformer in countless ways, he was also firmly Augustinian in his official attitude towards marriage. He agreed with St. Augustine that marriage should serve three purposes. In order of importance these reasons are: 1) procreation; 2) the avoidance of sin; 3) companionship and mutual help.

In Luther’s written treatises on marriage, proper marital households were hierarchical and patriarchal – with men at the head of the household. Women were to learn to read for the purpose of educating children, but were not allowed to preach. Protestant women lost their right to a monastic religious vocation and were now mandated to fulfill their sacred duties as wives and mothers; however, Luther had also placed the future means of women’s liberation firmly in their hands in the shape of the Bible which they could not only now read for themselves, but in their own language instead of the Latin of male scholars.

There are cracks and inconsistencies in Luther’s words and deeds concerning women. We feminists inhabit these cracks, working them and stretching them into sizable fissures in order to examine how theological writings contradict themselves and how official statements actually match up to lived realities.

For example, while Luther expected his wife to be a model of domestic womanhood, his nicknames for her point to an interesting balance of power in their relationship. Martin referred to Katharina as “the boss” and “Lord Katy”. Even if

¹ Ronald H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Plume, 1995).

these names were said with irony or sarcasm, I suspect there were annoying assertions of power on her part to warrant them.

Luther once said, “If I can endure conflict with the devil, sin, and a bad conscience, then I can put up with the irritations of Katy von Bora.”²

While raising 6 children, Katharina ran the household, a farm and a business. She oversaw the breeding and selling of cattle, she ran a boarding house for Luther’s swarms of students and visitors, and she managed a brewery.

She would also participate in after-dinner theological and political discussions called “table talks” with Luther and his male guests, a rare activity for a woman of her day. Sabine Kramer, who writes on Katharina von Bora, said, “Luther played his role in the Reformation, but it’s important to remember that she played hers too...there wouldn’t have been table talks if she hadn’t provided the table.”³

Luther was both a theological and a practical man. He argued that it wasn’t practical for the women of his time to be priests in every sense of the word, since he thought that they were unqualified to fill this role; however, there is a glaring theological tension in his thinking about who is qualified to do what in God’s kingdom. He wrote:

“That the pope or bishop anoints, makes tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or dresses differently from the laity, may make a hypocrite or an idolatrous oil-painted icon, but it in no way makes a Christian or spiritual human being. In fact, we are all consecrated priests through Baptism, as St. Peter in 1 Peter 2[:9] says, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly kingdom..."⁴

We can read this passage from 1 Peter as a text of radical liberation for women; a text that includes the marginalized and exalts the second class citizens as worthy of being priests in the kingdom of God by virtue of baptism.

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 54, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

³ Andrew Curry, “How a Runaway Nun Helped an Outlaw Monk Change the World” https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/10/martin-luther-wife-protestant-reformation-500/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Social&utm_content=link_fbp20171021hist-luterwifereformation&utm_campaign=Content&sf124007632=1 (accessed October 26, 2017).

⁴ Martin Luther, *Weimar Ausgabe*, vol. 6, p. 407, lines 19–25 as quoted in Timothy Wengert, “The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths,” page 12.

And consider Luther's more particular words for women. He said,

“When women baptize, they exercise the function of priesthood legitimately and do it not as a private act but as a part of the public ministry of the Church which belongs only to the universal priesthood.”⁵

Luther states that women have the God-given power to baptize as a *public* priestly act. Quite a statement for someone who considers the role of women to be limited to the private sphere of the family. Furthermore, according to Luther, the power to baptize carries with it all the other priestly functions, such as ministering the word of God as a part of the baptism ceremony.

So, we see in Luther's theology, both the incitement of a new wave of oppression for women who must commit themselves solely to family affairs, *and* the possibility for women's future liberation as church leaders with the power to baptize, minister the word, and serve as priests in God's kingdom.

The theme of baptism brings me to my next tale of reforming women.

In their work on Pilgram Marpeck, the mid-16th century leader of the South German Anabaptists, William Klassen and Walter Klaassen write that Pilgram Marpeck's own wife Anna was possibly one of the many Anabaptist midwives practicing in the 16th century in France and Germany.⁶

Anabaptists opposed infant baptism, but midwives at the time were, by law, supposed to perform spontaneous baptisms if they thought an infant was in danger of dying. Anabaptist midwives would report that an inordinate number of perfectly healthy babies were in danger of dying so that they could pretend to perform emergency baptisms! They *wanted* these infant baptisms on record so that infants wouldn't really be baptized. Anabaptists called this kind of baptism a *Jachtauff*, or a joke baptism.

There is evidence that the midwives would even lie about these phantom baptisms under oath, declaring that a child “was weak at that time”, even if they knew very

⁵ Martin Luther, *Concerning the Ministry*, 1523, in *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff, vol. 40 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 23.

⁶ William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, *Marpeck: A Life of Dissent and Conformity* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008).

well that it had been perfectly healthy.⁷ One midwife named Martha Rielin was fined and stripped of her official status as a midwife, by the record reads that “Martha is still a midwife, even though she is no longer authorized. We have dealt with her often, but to no avail.”⁸

Elsbeth Hershberger was imprisoned for her Anabaptist beliefs several times in the 1530s for reportedly “influencing numerous parents not to have their children baptized.”⁹

These Anabaptist midwives found creative and courageous and illegal ways to live the conviction of their faith as reforming women.

The last reforming woman I’d like to talk about is Argula von Grumbach.

Argula was the first Protestant woman to use the printing press to disseminate her ideas through pamphlets. She was born into a privileged German family in 1492 and received a good, but informal, education for a 16th century woman. Her father gave her a German Bible when she was 10 years old, which she never put down. She joined the court in München as a teenager and it was there that she absorbed ideas from great minds such as John von Staupitz, Martin Luther’s mentor. She later placed her children in Protestant schools, despite having married a devout Catholic man. For many reasons, her marriage was not a happy one. Maybe it was because her very loud mouth got her husband fired from his job – something for which she had no remorse.

Argula’s brother studied at the University of Ingolstadt and it was most likely through him that she first heard about the affair of Arsacius Seehofer, a student at the university who included many of Luther’s writings and ideas in his work. Unfortunately for Seehofer, John Eck, the notorious enemy and prosecutor of Luther, was a senior faculty member at Seehofer’s university. Seehofer was eventually arrested and forced to renounce Luther’s ideas.

When Argula heard about this, she was incensed, so she sent a long letter to the university heads demanding to know what heresy Arsacius had committed. And

⁷ <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Midwives> (accessed Oct. 26, 2017).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Marlene Epp, “Women who ‘made things right’: Midwife-Healers in Canadian Mennonite Communities of the Past” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter, 28:1).

she challenged them to defend their views using only scripture, not Roman Catholic traditions as their authority. Along with some pretty spicy words of her own, she also pummeled them with 80 scripture passages. Here is a taste of her letter:

*How in God's name can you and your university expect to prevail, when you deploy such foolish violence against the word of God; when you force someone to hold the Holy Gospel in their hands for the very purpose of denying it, as you did in the case of Arsacius Seehofer?*¹⁰

She concluded her letter by saying:

*What I have written to you is no woman's chit-chat, but the word of God; and (I write) as a member of the Christian Church, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. Against the Roman, however, they do prevail. Just look at that Church! How is it to prevail against the gates of Hell? God give us grace, that we all may be saved, and may (God) rule us according to his will. Now may His grace carry the day.*¹¹

Much to the embarrassment of the university, her letter was published as a pamphlet and became a bestseller with 14 editions published in 2 months.

Argula offered to meet with the university leaders, but warned that she could not speak Latin, only read it, so the meeting would have to be conducted in German. She wrote: “I do not flinch from appearing before you, from listening to you, from discussing with you. For by the grace of God I, too, can ask questions, hear, answer, and read in German.”¹²

Her letter was never acknowledged by the university except for the publication of a poem which was known to have been written by a member of the university faculty, which reads:

*A silly bag
Wretched and pathetic daughter of Eve*

¹⁰ Peter Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice in the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² As quoted by Kelly Douma, “Argula von Grumbach: Pamphlets, Poems, and Printing”

http://www.academia.edu/32833826/_Argula_von_Grumbach_Printing_Poems_and_Pamphlets_in_Reformation_Germany_ (accessed Oct. 26, 2017).

A female desperado
An arrogant devil
*A shameless whore.*¹³

I'd like to think that Argula responded by saying, "may we all be called silly bags in the service of the Lord."

While Argula was not given a chance to meet with the Ingolstadt university leadership to argue her case in person, she did succeed in dramatically expanding her circle of influence from discussions with family and friends in the private sphere, to a broad public readership, including Balthasar Hubmaier, the 16th century Anabaptist theologian who likened her to biblical prophetess.

I'd like to conclude with a slightly different reading of our text from 1 Peter. These remarkable Reformation women are the living stones that have formed our spiritual temple. They have a unique understanding of Christ, the corner-stone who was at first rejected by the builders. They have given shape to the holy universal priesthood as prophetesses, theologians, mothers, discussion partners, protestors, and deceivers for the sake of truth. They have been claimed by God for Her own, to proclaim the glorious deeds of the one who has called us out of darkness and into marvelous light. May we continue to work the cracks and bring to light the stories of those whose words and deeds are the stones upon which our living and reforming church is built. Amen.

¹³ As quoted in <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1201-1500/you-wouldnt-want-to-argue-with-argula-11629897.html> (accessed Oct 26, 2017).